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ABSTRACT

Morehead State University's technical writing internship program provides students who are not suited to larger, industry-based writing internship programs with professional writing experience. Most interns are English majors, and only the best and most interested students are selected. The program confers 3-6 semester hours' credit and aims to place students in offices or agencies on campus or in local or state government offices with ongoing, integrated writing projects in progress. The bulk of the internships are with the university's Department of Public Information, which produces promotional literature for the university. Any institution interested in implementing an internship program should take care in (1) choosing supervising agencies and writers (some agency heads exploit interns to the extent that the students do little more than fetch coffee); (2) matching students to projects (so that a formula writer, for instance, is not put into a situation that requires a great deal of creativity); and (3) outlining and maintaining written controls and standards to make sure both the intern and the supervisor completely understand the rules. Although students gain little in the way of open doors to jobs in their field, the beauty of a college-run internship program versus an industry based one is that college programs tend to be more flexible and sensitive to individual students' needs. (AEW)

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STUDENT EDITING INTERSHIPS IN LOW-INDUSTRY
GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS
Gene Young, Morehead State (KY) University

Morehead State University, settled comfortably (and sleepily) in the Daniel Boone National Forest of eastern Kentucky, is our state's designated regional university for Appalachia. Probably because of our location in an especially low-industry area, there seems little to recommend us--and particularly the students in our small technical communications program--to Bell Laboratories, Oak Ridge, or other industrial beneficiaries looking for prospective technical writers. Neither do such companies swarm over our tiny campus--despite our recent proud acquisition of indoor plumbing and cable television (including Masterpiece Theatre)--in search of the cheap but enthusiastic labor that commonly comes under the heading "Technical Writing Intern." In fact, my dean called me the other day (right in the middle of "Mayberry, R.F.D.") to ask why no industrial giants ever called on us in search of writing and editing interns.

I explained to him that there was little cause for these companies to look to the hills for writing interns when they are so plentiful in the urban university technical writing programs. My dean suggested that if his sainted alma mater (to go unmentioned here) has an internship

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program, then Morehead State should have one, too, so why didn't I get on the stick and develop one. And while I was at it I could write up a paper on the program and deliver it to some august body eager to embrace wisdom no matter whence the source. I told him that I didn't know of any such body but that maybe 4C's would be kind enough to take it. I also reminded him that the eastern Kentucky equivalent to Intergraph and the Redstone Arsenal is the local chain of Burl's Bait Shops (where you can also rent movie videos). Well, my dean--in the stunningly original discourse which is his signature--said, "That's your problem, not mine."

Well, being nobody's fool, here I am reporting on the Morehead State University Department of English, Foreign Languages, and Philosophy (and College of Arts and Sciences) Technical Communications Writing and Editing Internship Program. I am basically here to reveal to you that a college in a low-industry (and you have to admit that a chain of video and bait shops is pretty low industry)--that a college in a low-industry rural area can do quite well in providing its students practical, useful, and even enriching technical writing and editing internships.

In this paper, I intend to be as candid as I can in admitting drawbacks to such a program while at the same time suggesting certain advantages over the higher-powered internship programs associated with urban colleges and

universities. My suggestions will be twofold: (1) that smaller universities like us might (if they don't already have one) pursue such programs as ours and (2) that larger universities with industrial writing and editing internships already in place might consider adding a university/community component such as ours as an alternative to the more scientific, technical, or industrial mainline program.

Let me begin by giving you a description of our intern program and the students who populate it. First, ours is not a full-time internship; rather it gives 3 to 6 semester hours credit, depending on the nature of the writing project involved and the length of time it takes to complete it. The courses for the internship are English 592 and 597. (Courses on the 500 level are for seniors or graduate students.) The prerequisite is English/Journalism 591, our advanced technical writing course. English 592 is effectively a writing internship, while 597 is technical editing; neither can be taken without the instructor's permission.

What we try to do is use only the best and most interested students from the advanced technical writing course. Our aim is to place them in offices or agencies on campus or in local or state government offices which have an ongoing, integrated, extended writing project in the works. Our student is placed in the office to write or edit

(generally for 12 hours per week) under the direct charge of a writing supervisor who has experience as a writer. (We aren't in the business of hiring out our students as mere comma-plumbers or typists.) As overall supervisor of the program I see that the our program operates in the best interests of the department and the student, while at the same time providing a valuable service to agencies on our campus and in our community.

Now a word on our students before going on to mention some of the specific writing and editing projects we have undertaken. Our students are not, as you might expect, all descendents of either the Griner brothers or of Ma and Pa Kettle. In fact, their enthusiasm for these internships, their eagerness and ability to perform, has made this enterprise wholly rewarding. Our interns come primarily from the following majors: English (the bulk), Journalism, Foreign Languages, Sociology, Corrections, Pre-Law, and Education. (Despite an occasional exception, we don't get many students from the sciences or technological programs. We're hoping to get nibbles from our new four-year nursing program.)

Here are some of the individual projects we have undertaken. One of our most rewarding involved a black student who worked with our university attorney on the university hiring procedures document. The experience was an eye-opener for both the student and the attorney.

(Besides taking advantage of this experience in legal writing and research she--an English major hoping to become a lawyer--has been able to examine university law in a depth few professors ever approach. In fact, the lawyer and I, before we could enter into the project, had to hammer out an agreement over what portions of the student's writing I could and could not review.)

One of our most recent successes came through the work of the former Marine aviator and Viet Nam Veteran (a graduate student in business) who wrote and edited for our Small Business Development Administration office a \$250,000 proposal to establish a sheep-farming program in rural eastern Kentucky. Imagine his euphoria when the Department of Agriculture funded the proposal. Imagine my embarrassment at giving him only the (agreed-upon) three hours credit for his accomplishment.

Another triumph involved the graduate student in psychology (now in the Ph. D. program at another university) who interned in the office of our Vice-President for Academic Affairs writing a long-overdue, politically sensitive (and therefore stylistically sensitive) university policy manual. This student was one of few I would have entrusted with such a project (and indeed the request from the Vice-President's office gave our program no small boost in credibility). At the end of the project, she (our Academic Vice-President) told me that she (the student)

had--as the principal writer on the project--helped make university policy.

Other noteworthy internships include the education major who compiled (with our Appalachian Development Center as the supervising agency) a document on eastern Kentucky fiddlers, a document now housed in the National Archives in the Library of Congress; the foreign language major who constructed an entire schedule of events and promotional literature campaign for the university public radio station; and the student who is credited with a large measure of the success of our university promotional magazine and informational guide for prospective students. In fact, most of our internships have been with the university Department of Public Information, which undertakes various projects to produce promotional literature for the university. This experience is of particular benefit, since it brings into play not only writing and editing but participation as a "regular" staff member in idea sessions as well as exposure to the computer typesetting, camera work, layout, and production of what resembles a high-powered four-color corporate magazine.

Those are some of our specific successes. Now let me issue a few warnings for those of you considering such a program. First, you must be very careful to keep control of the program and the individual projects. Unlike writing internships in industry, internships in campus or community

agencies are very unpredictable, even after you have been running the program for a few years. While the great diversity of projects is appealing, it also introduces the element of uncertainty, requiring a greater measure of control than you might imagine necessary.

Next (and this is related to the problem mentioned just before), you must be very careful in your choice of supervising agencies and supervising writers. As you might expect, there is a strong tendency in some people, particularly agency heads, to take advantage of internships to the extent that the students become little more than go-fers. It must be made expressly clear to potential supervisors that they are not to violate either the time commitment allowed or the other facts of the agreement we all read and discuss before finalizing the internship.

You must also take great care in matching the student to the project. Again, the great potential variety of writing situations demands that you measure the writing situation against the particular skills and inclinations of the student. One of our failures involved just such a mis-match. We placed a student who had been a wonderfully precise, though distressingly formulaic, technical writer into a promotional writing campaign that demanded creative pizzazz, not writing by rote. She was miserable; her supervisor was at wit's end in two weeks. After those first two weeks the student basically appeared at work, then

(figuratively) retired into a corner, pulled an electric blanket about her, assumed the fetal position, and turned the temperature control up to "9". Luckily, even before the first required progress report was due, the writing supervisor gave me a call and brought the problem into the light. We were able to find the student another project more suited to her talent (we have a waiting list of agencies each semester) and was even able, luckily, to begin another student on that creative project. (I should say that this sort of administrative freelancing requires an administration sufficiently benevolent to let you shake and bake as necessary. While we are lucky enough to be able to make these changes without so much as a blink from our department head and dean, you may have more difficulty.)

All this leads me to underscore the need for careful written controls and standards for the actual conduct of the internship. Do not rely merely on handshaking and gentle verbal agreements. We provide written descriptions of our internship guidelines to both the writing supervisor and the intern. We also require (and distribute to the supervisor for signature) a written internship proposal from the student. This is done within a week of the set-up meeting (among the three of us) at the beginning of the semester. We also require at least two written progress reports, each, from the student and the supervisor, this in addition to

agreed-on meetings (in the agency offices) at appropriate times of the semester.

Finally, I cannot overstress the need to establish a circumstance wherein both the student and the supervisor feel comfortable coming to us with problems. (This is one reason I encourage you to use agencies rather than campus academic departments as the sources of your internships. Academic departments have plenty of writing projects to be done, but they tend to treat students like dogs; writing in the supervision of an academic department will reduce Rambo to tears in three days flat. Their typical mode of operation reminds me of the old military maxim: they measure it with a micrometer; they line it with a magic marker; and they cut it with an axe.)

Finally, let me offer you a brief list of disadvantages and advantages of this sort of internship program as balanced against the industry-based program. Disadvantages: (1) Our students tend to get less exposure to the world of the practicing professional technical writer. Our writing supervisors tend to be good writers but not by definition technical writers. (2) As I have mentioned, we have to deal with a bewildering complexity of writing situations, projects, and personalities, whereas the industry-based situation is a little more predictable. (3) Since these are not operations in the mainstream of professional

technical writing, our students gain little in the way of footholds or open doors to jobs in this field.

The advantages over the industry-based programs? (1) Especially if your students will not become professional technical writers or editors, this type of internship translates into the kind of in-the-pocketbook experience that pays dividends in manifold ways. It is also true, that our students and supervisors work under professional but relatively relaxed writing conditions. The relationship between the supervisor and the student intern often becomes close and the letters of recommendation take on both the enthusiasm and the specificity resulting from close personal involvement. (2) The variability I have spoken of as a drawback can also work to our advantage. Probably much more than our colleagues in larger programs, we can generally make good matches of skill available to task demanded. It is not insignificant, either, that (given our small campus and small community) we are able to match students whose personalities we know very well to supervisors whose personalities we know very well. (3) Finally, we tend to have much greater flexibility. As you know, the "I must have this done today" syndrome describes both academics and industry; however, it is only industry in which it really makes any difference whether it gets done today or tomorrow or next year. I suppose the expression that obtains here is this, applied to slightly different subject matter:

"University politics are so vicious precisely because there is so little at stake." Of course, students do learn to work under deadlines in our program, but the generally slipshod manner of academics allows us much needed flexibility in scheduling and administering our internships.

To close, I will simply repeat what I've said before: If you teach technical communications in a small rural college, don't despair. You, too, can have your technical writing internship program. If you already run an industry-based internship program, consider supplementing it with an agency-community program. Besides forever endearing yourself to members of agencies badly in need of good, cheap writing help, you will have provided valuable professional writing experience to those students who (for whatever reason) do not fit in the larger industry-based writing internship programs.